

## Rosh Hashanah President's Speech, October 2005

L' Shanah Tova!

My name is Jerry Elman and it is indeed an honor to be here speaking to you on Rosh Hashanah for the 4<sup>th</sup> time as your president.

I want to welcome all our new members who are here with us for the first time. My hope is that Temple Sinai will become a very special place to you and your families.

Serving as the congregation's president has been a source of personal renewal and growth. The many friendships I've developed across the congregation will be cherished for years to come.

I want to thank Sue Stanger, Alan Frishman and all the volunteers that coordinated the move this year to the JCC for these services.

Each year this committee puts in all the planning and physical labor, to create a worship environment that is warm and special for all of us.

I want to thank our Professional Staff, Office Staff and Custodial Staff, for all you do behind the scenes.

We are blessed by the dedication and commitment all these people give to Temple Sinai every day of the week.

I also want to thank all the members of the board of trustees, officers of the temple, committee chairs and committee members, who collectively are such a wonderful and talented group of people and give so much of themselves to this congregation behind the scenes.

The past year has been a difficult and challenging year for all of us in many different ways.

It seems the challenges across the world become much more complex and difficult with each passing year.

The American economy is recovering, yet too many people including many of our fellow congregants remain unemployed.

Whether we support or don't support the war in Iraq, we all share the pain, sorrow and frustrations associated with the ongoing conflict and the daily loss of American, Iraqi and other lives.

There is new hope for peace in the Middle East, but the road is still long, difficult and fragile to achieve real peace.

Anti Israel sentiment and Anti-Semitism are at new peaks across the globe.

Most recently, the United States has suffered the worst natural disaster in our history.

What we thought was unimaginable in human suffering in modern America, is today a reality because of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

We also learned a new reality of our nation's "safety net" which most of us took for granted, especially after 9/11.

Those that were disadvantaged and poor somehow got left behind and lost in this devastation.

Those that were ill or aged, and happened to be in hospitals and nursing homes also got left behind and lost in this devastation.

At the time, the orders to evacuate seemed very logical and straight forward when issued.

After all, people just needed to get into their cars and go, and almost a million people did.

Frankly until the reality of this natural disaster became known - that was all I thought it took to get people to safety. -- Just withdraw cash from an ATM, get into your cars and get away!

Go to other family members or a hotel in a safe area! Isn't that what any of us here today would do in that situation?

I believed that the people left behind, were those who chose to stay behind due to their stubbornness. They made a deliberate choice to put their lives at risk.

I had no idea there would be people who had "no choice" but to stay.

The thought that there were people without cars, without money and without the means to flee or even anywhere to go to, never entered my mind as the hurricane warnings were issued and the hurricane hit and the unprecedented devastation and flooding occurred.

But as we so sadly and tragically saw after the fact, the poor, ill and disadvantaged were trapped and abandoned, not by intent on anyone's part, but by their circumstances, which they could not control.

Who could believe in America today that such a disaster of this extreme could happen?

Even worse, who could imagine in America today, so many people would be vulnerable and trapped like we've seen in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries where we know in these kinds of natural disasters, a majority of people are trapped by their circumstances and poverty.

One only has to recall last year's Tsunami in Asia and the images we saw in that disaster of how such devastation impacts impoverished people in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world.

As a Reform Jew and a member of Temple Sinai, I have always believed we have an obligation to take care of the disadvantaged and ensure their safety and well being as much as our own.

I still cannot sort out in my own mind if I could not understand the vulnerability until reality struck -- or did I understand the vulnerability but was indifferent to it until I was faced with the reality.

This very issue is called out in the Torah many times.

Jews because of our very own history as a people ought to know what it is like to be disadvantaged, poor, vulnerable and even persecuted due to situations out of peoples' control.

As most of you know both of my parents were holocaust survivors. My father in his writings about the holocaust stated and I quote:

"It is impossible to describe the atrocities of the Hitler bandits in occupied Poland and Russia.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an entire nation of people was put to death by the most horrible inquisition methods – a nation with such fine and beautiful traditions, only because they bore the name of a Jew."

He further writes and I quote:

"I was asked many times, why did the Jews allow themselves to be led to slaughter, and why did they not resist the Germans when it was already known the end was near? Why? Why? Why?"

He then went into describing the very situations and conditions Jews under German occupation were subjected to, which they had no control over. For the sake of time I am skipping those descriptions.

He then goes on – "This question is still being asked by people today who are physically healthy, not hungry, well rested and able to go anywhere they want without fear.

I ask these people to tell me how people in the situation which I previously described, and who were also physically and mentally exhausted and starving, resist and put up a fight?"

The bottom line is the question my father addressed and the questions going through our minds today regarding the disaster in the Gulf coast both have the very same answer.

Unless we've actually been there and experienced it for ourselves, we really don't understand.

It is possible to go through life like a robot, unaware and indifferent to our surroundings and the differences we have with other people in totally different situations than our own.

The Torah itself acknowledges this human possibility and asks us to transcend it.

The Torah tells us to never forget the Jewish people's own suffering, mistreatment and abandonment over time - going back to the days of Egyptian slavery - because to remember will help us identify and fight indifference when we see others suffer, forgotten or in need today.

The two words "Never Forget" is a term universally known by most Jews worldwide.

None of this means all people have to be equal in financial means.

There will always be differences in people's financial means and the world has learned that pure socialism does not work.

But we must not stand back and be indifferent to poor and disadvantaged people to the point they have no choice but to live their lives without acceptance, dignity and respect.

We must do all we can to understand that what is obvious for us in our own lifestyles and situations, is totally different for others in totally different situations.

Imagine any of us having to live life with no means and nowhere to go if disaster struck and even worse, there was no-one who cared or was willing to help.

As a nation we learned from Hurricane Katrina. All levels of government and people across America all came together and did our very best to be prepared for Hurricane Rita which hit only weeks later. No longer was anything taken for granted. No longer were we indifferent!

As Reform Jews in a very special congregation called Temple Sinai, we must learn from this experience and not ever take things for granted or worse yet be indifferent.

We must not lose sight of all those that suffer and have special needs in our own congregation, in our own community, in our own country and throughout the world.

It starts with our own connections with one another here at Temple Sinai.

It starts with the friendships we establish with each other here at Temple Sinai.

It starts with helping those in our very own congregational community who need our help.

It starts with our many education and social action programs and other opportunities that connect us with the needs of others outside our community.

It starts with RAIHN and our efforts to help homeless families get back on their feet.

And most recently it starts with Temple Sinai's participation in the Union for Reform Judaism's Jacob's Ladder Project, where URJ resources and youth camps in the South were mobilized faster than most government agencies reacted, to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina. URJ's efforts helped Jews and non-Jews alike.

There is so much good our Reform Movement and our congregation already does.

But recent events tell us there is much more to do.

We must become closer and stronger among ourselves as a synagogue community.

We must reach out even further and do even more to understand those who are different than us, those who are not part of our community, and those who are victims of circumstances they cannot control.

There is much more to do and each and every one of us can make a difference in our own special ways.

We will do this because that is who we are as Reform Jews. That is our strength, determination and spirit as a people and as a congregation.

There is no doubt in my mind that the future of our congregation, community, country and the world has endless potential to all be a better place.

The future presents a very exciting opportunity if we each exercise the choices we have as individuals and then come together as a congregation to make it so.

I want to close with a Reform Jewish prayer I read several weeks ago at an interfaith event.

“Our God, the guide of humanity, let your spirit rule this nation and its citizens, that their deeds may be prompted by a love of justice and right, and bear fruit in goodness and peace.

Teach us to work for the welfare of all, to diminish the evils that beset us, and to enlarge our nation’s virtues.

Bless our striving to make real the dream of your nation, when we shall put an end to the suffering we now inflict upon each other.

For you have endowed us with noble powers; help us to use them wisely and with compassion.

You have given us freedom to choose between good and evil, life and death. May we choose life and good, that our children may inherit from us the blessings of dignity and freedom, prosperity and peace.”

May it be so in the coming year!

Janet, Sandi, David and I want to wish all of you a very happy, healthy and fulfilling new year.

L’ Shanah Tova